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THE "DUCHESS OF MALFI" CONSIDERED AS A TRAGEDY-OF-BLOOD.

OF our Elizabethan dramatists, John Webster has perhaps suffered more than any other from a lack of comprehension of his historical position. Since the days when Charles Lamb revived an interest in this once-forgotten lion of our early drama, he has been known as the sole author of two great plays and as the joint handicraftsman of a number of other pieces ranging from mediocrity to rare romantic witchery. Throughout the nineteenth century his fame has steadily grown, until at present the general consensus of critical opinion places him second only to Shakespeare. Only two rivals arise seriously to dispute his claim. He is less of a scholar and an observer of men than Ben Jonson, and is also inferior to him in dramatic inventiveness and in masterly reproduction of character. Again, he is subordinate to Beaumont and Fletcher in facility of construction and in lyrical grace of tone. But in sudden sallies of penetrative genius, in flashes of insight into the mainsprings of human action and the subtle emotions which lie deep-seated in the human heart—in short, in those very excellences which move us in the greatest tragedies of all time—he stands all but preëminent, and admits of no peer but Shakespeare himself.

In spite of the fact that for many years Webster has been steadily growing in popularity with modern readers, his life is still enshrouded in mystery, and we might justly say of him:

"We ask and ask; thou smilest and art still,
Outtopping knowledge."

Our critics have considered his genius as inexplicable; and even Mr. Gosse has looked upon him as a "shrouded figure," holding himself mysteriously aloof from the literary and theatrical life of his time. It takes but little critical acumen, however, to discover a family resemblance between Webster's two great tragedies and a dozen other Elizabethan plays which are scattered over the thirty years immediately

preceding the climax of Webster's literary career. The most distinguishing characteristics of this group of tragedies are their profusion of sanguinary slaughter and their brooding analysis of incidents essentially horrible; and it has therefore become common to speak of them, broadly, as "tragedies of blood," although no one has taken pains specifically to define this elastic term.

That such a species of tragedy should arise was the natural result of the temper of the Elizabethan age. England was then in the joy of her adolescence, and the blood coursed wildly through her veins. The Invincible Armada had been swept off the face of the seas, and Sir Francis Drake had swooped down upon Cadiz and bearded the Spanish lion in his den. It was an age of buoyancy and expansiveness, an age much akin to that thrilling era of Roman grandeur when men were forced to dissipate their over-accumulated energy with the stirring amusement of gladiatorial combats and duels to death with infuriated beasts. The pre-Shakespearean audiences in England were accustomed, on alternate days, to attend a bear-baiting, a play, and a cockfight; and it was but natural, therefore, that they should crave strong sensation in tragedy, and should demand an enormity of bloodshed on the mimic arena of the stage. The ebullient spirits of the early Elizabethans could be satisfied only with such an energy of slaughter as would have sickened the aristocratic audiences of Rotrou and Corneille, in the corresponding youth of the French theater. Our early dramatists, therefore, necessarily subservient to the demands of their audiences, poured all of their romantic affluence into stirring and sensational themes; and thus, broadly considered, nearly all of our earliest tragedies are "tragedies-of-blood."

While the genealogy of the tragedy-of-blood is not very clear, it is probable that the species sprang from the marriage of the primitive popular drama with Senecan and Italian pseudo-Senecan tragedy. About the time when Sackville and Norton were building up their ponderous "*Gorboduc*," the moralities and chronicle histories began to assume a greater amount of intrigue than before, and at the same time be-

gan to be enlivened by the introduction of dramatic materials from Italy. During the early Renaissance the rhetorical intensity of Seneca had degenerated, in the hands of his Italian imitators, into a more than Medean fierceness. Retaining the external machinery of Seneca's tragedies—his ghosts, his chorus, and his tumid rhetoric—the Italian pseudo-Senecans created monstrosities of tragic horror which exerted no little influence on the English dramatists. At the same time the Italian decadent romances, with their wide variety of horrible themes, began to achieve a popular currency in England, and furnished our authors of tragedies of blood with a number of thrilling incidents. The Italian influence upon our drama was fostered by the attitude of the court, where both the language and the literature of Italy were immensely popular. But the Italy which had the greatest influence upon our tragic authors was, after all, an imaginary Italy, a State where lust and crime and bloodshed held illimitable dominion, and where the atmosphere was ever murky with the fumes of carnage. Even without the foreign stimulus to their imaginations, our early authors of tragedy could not have failed, under the conditions then existing, to have evolved their horror-tragedies. The tragedy-of-blood is essentially an English growth, evolved to meet the demands of our early Elizabethan audiences; and we can find little profit in speculating overfancifully about its origin.

As soon as the tragedy of blood was definitely established as a form of dramatic composition, certain stock ingredients became the invariable attributes of the species, and were utilized in turn by all of the dramatists who essayed it. These stock motives and characters are so incessantly recurrent that upon their appearance or nonappearance may be based the decision whether or not a play is to be included in this class. Seldom, indeed, are all of the stock materials incorporated in a single tragedy, and the tastes of different playwrights have afforded a wide variety in their combination; but in every true tragedy-of-blood some, at least, of the traditional motives must be prominently apparent.

The tragedy-of-blood is invariably a tragedy of *revenge*;

and it follows, therefore, that one of the most important of its stock characters is the hero with a wrong to avenge. This wrong is usually the murder of a relative or friend, which is accomplished either before the play begins or during the early part of the action. Kyd's "Spanish Tragedy" tells of the vengeance of the hero, Hieronimo, for the death of his son, Horatio, who is murdered in the second act; and Shakespeare's "Hamlet," reversing the process, portrays the hero's exaction of retribution for the murder of a father who has been killed before the play begins. Sometimes the wrong to be avenged is of a less sanguinary character. In Marlowe's "Jew of Malta," for example, the hero seeks retribution for the confiscation of his wealth.

Hardly less important, and still more interesting, than the wronged hero is the personage whom the dramatists are fond of calling their Machiavelian villain. Endowed with rare intelligence and trained subtlety in intrigue, but perverting his natural cleverness by serving ends vindictive, pitiless, and cruel, the Machiavelian is a very villain for villainy's sake. He is an incarnation of the devil, and he takes the devil's pride in the success of his own wicked plots. It is hardly necessary to state that the subtle Italian politician from whom this character takes its name was never guilty of the systematic diablerie which the early Elizabethans read into him. The daring unconventionality of the beliefs expressed in "Il Principe" led its author to be suspected, in England, of a perverted cunning; but he certainly had little, besides his intellectual cleverness, in common with the scheming villains of the tragedy-of-blood.

The scheming villain is usually accompanied by a hired rogue, who acts as the instrument for executing the former's diabolical plans. This base creature, who sells himself to accomplish awful crimes to which he is stimulated by no passion of personal interest, becomes, in the hands of some of our more skillful dramatists, a personage of rare dramatic interest. He is often a man of irony who has come to the conclusion, after years of vicissitudes, that life is not worth living, and who takes up his infamous career to gratify

his humorous melancholy. He is seldom endowed with the intellectual acuteness of his Machiavelian employer, and, because of the nature of his employment, must be cold, dispassionate, and unemotional; but his distorted ethical outlook often lends to his reflections a pungent acerbity which is not devoid of interest.

While these three characters are the most important figures in the typical tragedy-of-blood, there are also a number of minor personages who constantly reappear. The most important of these is, perhaps, the ghost, who appears either to chide the hero for his delay in accomplishing vengeance (which is the case, of course, in "Hamlet") or to terrify the villain with remorse at the enormity of his crimes. The earliest tragedies-of-blood also regularly employ a chorus, which comments from time to time on the progress of the plot.

Around these stock ingredients the authors weave their stories of crime and horror and gloom. Slow and premeditated murder joins hands with sudden and ruthless slaughter. Rape and incest, bodily mutilation, despair, madness, and suicide, are their perennial themes; and over their reeking tragedies broods a pall of ineradicable gloom. In the earliest tragedies-of-blood the accumulated horrors are merely physical, and are almost sickening in their savage brutality; but little by little, as the species develops, the agonies of grief and despair and the awfulness of madness are emphasized more than the barbarous ferocity of bloodshed. Lyrical and imaginative elements were slowly gaining ground in the tragedy-of-blood even before the days of Shakespeare; and later on, when developed by a great poet like Webster, its horrors become psychological rather than physical.

Like most of the Elizabethan dramatists, John Webster served a laborious theatrical apprenticeship accomplishing hack dramatic work in collaboration with several of his contemporaries, but chiefly with Dekker. It was only, however, when untrammelled with the fetters of collaboration with minds less potent than his own that he could accomplish his greatest work. After he had learned the rudiments of his trade, he relinquished most of his literary partnerships,

and devoted himself to the strenuous and solitary labor of composing his mighty masterpieces. In his two greatest tragedies, the "*White Devil*; or, *Vittoria Corombona*" and the "*Duchess of Malfi*," he adopted the form of the tragedy-of-blood, and decked it in all of the glory of his poetry.

In spite of the fact that "*Vittoria Corombona*" must be considered as an almost unrelieved accumulation of horrible effects, we cannot but feel, on turning to it after the perusal of its predecessors in the same species, that we are breathing an atmosphere more poetic and more refined. We find no incest, no wanton and impulsive murder, no savage butchery in this tragedy; and while over it all may hover a pall of terror and of gloom, the shroud is pierced in more than one place by the light of sympathy and of pity. Flashes of poetic insight into the elemental emotions which throb in the heart of man, passages of awful grandeur which stir to the very core, touches of a delicate tenderness relieving the gloom which hovers over a tale of human ruin—these combine to raise "*Vittoria Corombona*" far above any preceding tragedy-of-blood, with the single exception of Shakespeare's "*Hamlet*." Its atmosphere is terrible rather than shocking, tragic rather than brutal.

Furthermore, this is the first tragedy-of-blood (always excepting "*Hamlet*") which, in addition to leading our imagination through a labyrinth of horror, brings us face to face with a *character* of Herculean dimensions. *Vittoria Corombona* is one of those great but evil women who, "in man's nostrils," as the poet tells us, are "poisoned perfumes." Capable of commanding all of the passionate impulses of her nature by a mighty and indomitable will, ruling the men who hover about her by an inexplicable fascination unabated by the bitterness of her pride, such is this Italian courtesan, the rock on which the other characters of the tragedy are driven to destruction. Brought face to face with her haughty and criminal nature, we cannot quarrel with the poet for calling her a "devil;" but she is a "*white devil*" withal, and there is a certain mystic charm about her which makes us feel ready to look with leniency upon her crimes.

The story of the tragedy tells of the ruin of Paulo Gior-dano Ursini, Duke of Brachiano, who falls under the spell of this alluring woman and for her sake murders both her husband and his own innocent wife. Vengeance overtakes him through the machinations of Francisco de Medicis, Duke of Florence, the brother of his murdered wife; and both he and Vittoria are cruelly punished for their crimes.

While this tragedy is transcendently great in several of its scenes, the plot as a whole is not well-proportioned. The careful elaboration to which Webster proudly referred in the address to the reader which he prefixed to the play shows itself not so much in the general construction of his tragedy as in the finish of many of its individual passages. He may justly be accused of a lack of dramatic coherence. His acts do not glide simply and naturally one from the other. Many of his episodes are as moving as his main events, and not a little of his tragic pity is expended on characters who are not organically united with the main body of his theme. In spite of its terrible power, "*Vittoria Corombona*" is far from faultless as a work of art; and we must, therefore, look not to it, but to the "*Duchess of Malfi*," for an incarnation of all that is greatest in the tragedy-of-blood.

The action of the "*Duchess of Malfi*" rises with a triumphant march until the grand climax in the fourth act, and then rushes steadily to its tempestuous catastrophe. The greatest individual passages of the "*White Devil*" remain unsurpassed in imaginative intensity by aught in the later tragedy, except, perhaps, the magnificent fourth act; but in the total effect the "*Duchess of Malfi*" is certainly superior. The plot is simpler and more consistently developed. The attention of the reader is riveted upon the few vividly drawn characters who bear the brunt of the dramatic struggle; and the introduction of episodes, which form so marked a feature of the construction of the "*Vittoria Corombona*," is here almost entirely discarded. The consciousness of effort is no longer painfully apparent either in the scenes or in the style of the play; and the spontaneous flashes of genius which sparkle in almost all of its scenes tend to make

all the more evident the mastery with which the whole is planned.

The story of the drama is exceedingly simple. The Duchess of Malfi, a woman gifted with all of the vivacity, the tenderness, and the long-suffering patience of beautiful femininity, but lacking that commanding force of personality which is indispensable to one who, like her, is forced to wage a war against conventional prejudices, falls in love with her steward, the noble Antonio, and secretly marries him. Her brothers, the fiery Duke Ferdinand and the subtle Cardinal, discovering her humble marriage, feel that she has daubed a blot on the proud scutcheon of their family; and for this reason plot a cruel vengeance which gradually snuffs out the life of their sister. The first four acts of the tragedy portray the inception and the gradual consummation of their heartless purpose, while the last act exhibits a rapid counter-vengeance against the Duke and the Cardinal, executed by the very rogue who has sold himself to carry out their crimes, but whose conscience is awakened by the terrible intensity of their guilt.

With a celerity of exposition unusual with Webster, we are made acquainted at the very opening of the tragedy with the moral nobility of the hero, Antonio, and with the railing pessimism of the hired rogue, Bosola. Bosola seeks preferment from the Cardinal, for whom he has accomplished some knavish business in the past; but he is slightly put off, and thereupon bursts into a torrent of semihumorous abuse of court life in general. Bosola is here the typical "melancholy, discontented courtier" of whom Kyd speaks in the "First Part of Jeronimo;" but he is soon to display an underlying humanity of character which places him far above all other rogues of the Elizabethan tragedy-of-blood.

As the chief characters appear upon the stage, Antonio, employing a primitive but effective method of exposition, outlines their peculiarities to his friend Delio. The most interesting figures are the two brothers of the Duchess, Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal, the twin Machiavellians of the drama. The characteristics of the conventional

scheming villain are wisely divided between them, so that, instead of creating a single monster like Marlowe's Barabas, or Marston's Piero, the dramatist has set before us two human beings delicately contrasted in temperament. Ferdinand is described as having a "perverse and turbulent nature." Endowed with a fiery temper which can brook no opposition, he conceives and executes his villainous designs with an explosive impetuosity. The Cardinal is of a cooler and subtler temperament. To circumvent an enemy, he is accustomed to "strew in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters." Instead of seizing his foe by the throat and stabbing him to death, a deed of which his brother would easily be capable, the Cardinal would lead him by some diabolical trap to walk blindly to his own destruction. Throughout the drama, these brothers in crime are foiled consistently, one against the other, as the character of each is developed. Their sister, the Duchess of Malfi, is a fair young widow whose discourse

is so full of rapture,
You only will begin then to be sorry
When she doth end her speech.

At Ferdinand's request, she receives into her service the rogue, Bosola, whom the Duke bribes to spy upon his sister and to note particularly if she is solicited for marriage. "She's a young widow," says Ferdinand, with portentous laconicism; "I would not have her marry again."

The brothers are about to leave Malfi; but before departing, they strongly enjoin their sister Duchess not to remarry. Hardly are they gone before the Duchess calls her steward to her and commences prettily to woo him. This difficult dialogue is very daintily handled. The manly reserve of Antonio, who dares not confess his love for his mistress, because of his inferiority in rank, is charmingly contrasted with the modest but insistent advances of the Duchess. "The misery of us that are born great!" she says. "We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us." She has much womanly vivacity and not a little self-reliance, and by her

delightful perseverance wins a man in no sense unworthy of her. The two kneel down and in the sight of Heaven solemnly register their marriage vows. All is sunshine, but a little cloud shows itself far away on the horizon when Cariola, the Duchess's maid, closes the act with the reflection:

Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman
Reign most in her, I know not; but it shows
A fearful madness: I owe her much of pity.

We "owe her much of pity;" this is the keynote of the tragedy which is to follow.

The opening of the second act is taken up with a further exposition of the raillery of Bosola. His irony is bitterer than that of his brother rogue, the Flamineo of "*Vittoria Corombona*," and the smartness of his repartee not infrequently recalls that of Hamlet's simulated madness. Some months have passed since the close of Act I., and the Duchess bears a son to Antonio. Their marriage has been carefully concealed, but Antonio is now unable to hide the condition of the Duchess from the prowling Bosola. The rogue gets possession of a paper mislaid by Antonio; and, finding it to be the horoscope of the Duchess's son, sends it posthaste to her brothers. The document contains no mention of Antonio's name; and the Duke Ferdinand, to whom it is delivered, naturally supposes that the Duchess's child is illegitimate. All of the fury of his passionate temperament is fired by this spark of intelligence. He rushes, with the letter in his hand, to his brother, the Cardinal, and madly rages at the disgrace of the Duchess. "Would I could be a tempest," he cries,

That I might toss her palace 'bout her ears,
Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads,
And lay her general territory as waste
As she hath done her honors.

The Cardinal receives the tidings with no less terrible ire, but, as we should naturally expect, from the greater stolidity of his nature, with more of outward calm. "How idly shows this rage," he says,

Which carries you,
 As men conveyed by witches through the air,
 On violent whirlwinds! this intemperate noise
 Fitly resembles deaf men's shrill discourse,
 Who talk aloud, thinking all other men
 To have their imperfection.

Ferdinand. Have not you my palsy?

Cardinal. Yes, but I can be angry
 Without this rupture: there is not in nature
 A thing that makes man so deformed, so beastly,
 As doth intemperate anger.

In the demeanor of both there is a terrible earnestness which bodes little good to their sister.

Some time again elapses, and the Duchess gives birth to two more children, a boy and a girl. Ferdinand, in the meantime, has come to Malfi; but in his outward converse with his sister has covered his rage with a cloak of quietude. That he has the instincts and the pride of a Machiavelian, however, we see by his lines to Bosola:

He that can compass me, and know my drifts,
 May say he hath put a girdle 'bout the world,
 And sounded all her quicksands.

Contrary to our expectations, the rogue does not stoop to flatter his employer. "You are your own chronicle too much, and grossly flatter yourself," he frankly rejoins. In this gleam of manly sincerity we see the first indication of that reversion of Bosola's character which later is to play a moving part in the drama.

Act III., Scene 2, opens with a pretty, playful dialogue in the Duchess's bedchamber, in which the maid, Cariola, joins with her mistress and Antonio in bandying airy pleasantries back and forth. "I prithee, when were we so merry?" the Duchess gleefully exclaims; but their joyousness is like the last gleam of sunlight before a storm. Antonio and Cariola steal away and leave the Duchess; while the Duke Ferdinand slinks in and listens to his sister's dallying soliloquy. The Duchess closes with the words, uttered half in jest: "Whether I am doomed to live or die, I can do both like a prince." At this Ferdinand rushes forward, thrusts a poniard into her hand, and cries: "Die, then, quickly!" Then

bursts forth the long-dammed torrent of his rage, and he lashes his innocent sister with goading abuse. But the storm passes almost impotently over her head, and her calm patience renders all the more pathetic her remonstrance:

Why should only I,
Of all the other princes of the world,
Be cased up like a holy relic? I have youth
And a little beauty.

But her gentleness cannot calm her brother's fury. "I will never see thee more," he cries, and rushes from her presence.

In order to save Antonio from discovery, the Duchess, with a *magnanima menzogna*, accuses her steward of falsifying his accounts, and banishes him to Ancona, where, as she informs him, she intends later to join him. The rogue, Bosola, on this occasion, boldly champions the cause of Antonio. With a seemingly commendable generosity, he defends the banished steward from the obloquy which has fallen upon him since his dismissal. But his purpose, at heart, is a base one. By justly praising Antonio, Bosola wins the confidence of the Duchess and leads her to confess to him that Antonio is her husband. Nothing could be more natural and more truly womanly than the way in which the reserve of the unsuspecting Duchess is melted away by the hypocritical sympathy of Bosola. This subtle expedient is entirely new in the annals of roguery, and clearly demonstrates Webster's preference for resorting to psychological rather than to purely theatrical motives to carry on his plot. The Duchess furthermore reveals her purpose of fleeing to Ancona; and Bosola hastens to Rome, to betray her to her brothers. He does not accomplish his wicked purpose, however, without chiding himself about his "base quality of intelligencer."

In an elaborate dumb-show we are informed of the banishment of Antonio and the Duchess from Ancona, at the instigation of the Cardinal. There is a deal of pathos in the words in which the Duchess utters her first sigh for the cruelty of her fate:

The birds that live i' the field
On the wild benefit of nature live
Happier than we; for they may choose their mates
And carol their sweet pleasures to the spring.

Antonio rejects Ferdinand's invitation to a conference, which is conveyed to him by Bosola; and he and the Duchess decide for politic reasons to part until the fury of the Duke is cooled. Antonio is to retire with his eldest son to Milan, while the Duchess keeps the other children. The scene of their parting again touches the chord of pathetic pity which Webster is so skillful in sounding.

Ant. Best of my life, farewell, since we must part.
Heaven hath a hand in 't; but no otherwise
Than as some curious artist takes in sunder
A clock or watch, when it is out of frame,
To bring 't in better order.

Duch. I know not which is best,
To see you dead, or part with you. Farewell, boy.
Thou art happy that thou hast not understanding
To know thy misery; for all our wit
And reading brings us to a truer sense
Of sorrow.

.
I have seen my little boy oft scourge his top,
And compared myself to 't: naught made me e'er
Go right but Heaven's scourge-stick.
.

Ant. If I do never see thee more,
Be a good mother to your little ones,
And save them from the tiger. Fare you well.

Duch. Let me look upon you once more, for that speech
Came from a dying father. Your kiss is colder
Than I have seen a holy anchoret
Give to a dead man's skull.

Hardly has Antonio departed before Bosola reënters with a guard, and arrests the Duchess. She has fallen into the hands of Ferdinand.

There follows that magnificent symphony of terror which constitutes what, with the single exception of the third act of "Othello," is the greatest *single act* in the English language. The Duchess has fallen into the hands of Ferdinand, and her brother has resolved to torture her with all of the agonies which can be conceived by mortal man. But the dramatist does not, like many of his predecessors, lose his head at this critical point in his plot, and rush blindly upon a campaign of reeking slaughter. The tortures

which our Machiavelian has devised for the punishment of his sister Duchess are not of that gross physical nature which characterizes the ghastly butcheries even of Tourneur's Vendice. He afflicts the mind of his victim rather than her body, and compasses her death only after having led her through the dismal recesses of a labyrinth of woe. He employs all of the gloomy paraphernalia of death, all of the grinning horror of madness, and all of the tortures of woeful anticipation to plunge his victim into the poignant agony of despair; and then, only after having consummated his cruel purpose, feels his own mind cracking under the awful strain.

The Duchess bears up under her suffering with that fortitude which has characterized her throughout the drama. As Bosola says of her:

She's sad as one long used to 't, and she seems
Rather to welcome the end of misery
Than shun it; a behavior so noble
As gives a majesty to adversity.
You may discern the shape of loveliness
More perfect in her tears than in her smiles;
She will muse four hours together; and her silence,
Methinks, expresseth more than if she spake.

Under cover of darkness—for he has vowed never to see his sister again—Ferdinand visits the Duchess in her prison, and when she asks his pardon extends to her a dead man's hand. The artificial figures of Antonio and his children are discovered behind a curtain, appearing as if they were dead. Bosola tells the Duchess that her husband has been killed, which almost drives her mad. She begs for death, but death is a boon with which her torturers will not yet bless her. When a servant wishes her long life, she cries:

I would that thou wert hanged for the horrible curse
Thou hast given me; I shall shortly grow one
Of the miracles of pity. I'll go pray;
No, I'll go curse.
Bos. O, fie!
Duch. I could curse the stars.
Bos. O, fearful!
Duch. And those three smiling seasons of the year
Into a Russian winter; nay, the world
To its first chaos.

Bos. Look you, the stars shine still.

Duch. O, but you must
Remember my curse hath a great way to go.

“Excellent, as I would wish,” says Ferdinand, gloating over the success of his cruel revenge; but even the rogue Bosola, dyed as he is in the blood of past murders, feels a twinge of pity. He cannot look the Duchess again in the face, and consents to continue his part in the dire tragedy only under cover of a disguise.

In the midst of her suffering the Duchess is accompanied by her maid Cariola. “Sit down,” she says,

Discourse to me some dismal tragedy.

Cari. O, 'twill increase your melancholy.

Duch. Thou art deceived;
To hear of greater grief would lessen mine.

She breaks occasionally into a note of lyric melancholy:

Duch. Dost thou think we shall know one another
In the other world?

Cari. Yes, out of question.

Duch. O that it were possible we might
But hold some two days' conference with the dead!
From them I should learn somewhat, I am sure,
I never shall know here.

To increase her mental agony, Ferdinand lets loose in her prison a herd of madmen, who chatter incoherently and dance to the dismal measures of a grinning song. Bosola enters, disguised as an old man. His first words stun with their awful laconicism. “I am come,” he says, “to make thy tomb.” The executioners enter, with a coffin, cords, and a bell; and, before the Duchess's own eyes, slowly make the solemn preparations for her death, while Bosola chants the mournful dirge:

Hark, now everything is still!
The screech-owl and the whistler shrill
Call upon our dame aloud,
And bid her quickly don her shroud!
Much you had of land and rent;
Your length in clay 's now competent:
A long war disturbed your mind;
Here your perfect peace is signed.
Of what is 't fools make such vain keeping?

Sin their conception, their birth weeping,
 Their life a general list of error,
 Their death a hideous storm of terror.
 Strew your hair with powders sweet,
 Don clean linen, bathe your feet,
 And (the foul fiend more to check)
 A crucifix let bless your neck;
 'Tis now full tide 'tween night and day;
 End your groan, and come away.

The last dialogue of the Duchess is so simple, so direct, and so touchingly pathetic that it would be impossible to convey in words any just estimate of its power. It must be quoted in its entirety, and speak for itself:

Duch. Farewell, Cariola.

In my last will I have not much to give:
 A many hungry guests have fed upon me;
 Thine will be a poor reversion.

Cari. I will die with her.

Duch. I pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy
 Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl
 Say her prayers ere she sleep.

[*Cariola is forced out by the executioners.*]

Now what you please:

What death?

Bos. Strangling; here are your executioners.

Duch. I forgive them;

The apoplexy, catarrh, or cough o' the lungs
 Would do as much as they do.

Bos. Doth not death fright you?

Duch. Who would be afraid on 't,
 Knowing to meet such excellent company
 In the other world?

Bos. Yet, methinks,
 The manner of your death should much afflict you;
 This cord should terrify you.

Duch. Not a whit:
 What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut
 With diamonds? or to be smothered
 With cassia? or to be shot to death with pearls?
 I know death hath ten thousand several doors
 For men to take their exits; and 'tis found
 They go on such strange geometrical hinges,
 You may open them both ways: any way, for Heaven sake,
 So I were out of your whispering. Tell my brothers
 That I perceive death, now I am well awake,
 Best gift is they can give or I can take.

I would fain put off my last woman's fault,
I'd not be tedious with you.

First Execut. We are ready.

Duch. Dispose my breath how please you; but my body
Bestow upon my women, will you?

First Execut. Yes.

Duch. Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength
Must pull down Heaven upon me.

Yet stay; Heaven-gates are not so highly arched
As princes' palaces; they that enter there
Must go upon their knees. [*Kneels.*] Come, violent death,
Serve for mandragora to make me sleep!
Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out,
They then may feed in quiet.

[*The executioners strangle the Duchess.*]

“She has lived among horrors,” says Charles Lamb, “till she has become ‘native and endowed unto that element.’ She speaks the dialect of despair, her tongue has a smatch of Tartarus and the souls in bale. What are ‘Luke’s iron crown,’ the brazen bull of Perillus, Procrustes’s bed, to the waxen images which counterfeit death, to the wild masque of madmen, the tomb makers, the mortification by degrees? To move a horror skillfully, to touch a soul to the quick, to lay upon fear as much as it can bear, to wean and weary a life till it is ready to drop, and then step in with mortal instruments to take its last forfeit—this only a Webster can do. Writers of an inferior genius may ‘upon horror’s head horrors accumulate,’ but they cannot do this. They mistake quantity for quality, they ‘terrify babes with painted devils,’ but they know not how a soul is capable of being moved; their terrors want dignity, their affrightments are without decorum.”

After the death of the Duchess, Cariola and the children “are brought in by the executioners, who presently strangle the children.” With a fine sense of dramatic contrast, Webster makes Cariola struggle to avert death, and her tempestuous end serves to magnify the calm serene of the Duchess’s death.

Ferdinand comes to survey the climax of his crimes. All the impetuosity of his fury has been expended in the awful vengeance which he has consummated, and he enters

with the serene self-confidence of a man who has accomplished a long-foreseen purpose. "Is she dead?" he calmly, almost flippantly, asks. But when he gazes upon the pallid features of his sister he begins to feel an awful throbbing in his breast, and when Bosola, whose latent humanity has been deeply touched by the cruelty of the scene in which he has participated, pours into his ears the direful words, "Murder shrieks out," he can bear it no longer. With one mighty upwelling of emotion his heart is overcome. "Cover her face," he cries, "mine eyes dazzle; she died young." And he plunges into melancholy reflection:

She and I were twins:
And should I die this instant, I had lived
Her time to a minute.
.
Let me see her face
Again. Why didst thou not pity her? What
An excellent honest man mightst thou have been
If thou hadst borne her to some sanctuary;
Or, bold in a good cause, opposed thyself,
With thy advanced sword above thy head,
Between her innocence and my revenge!
I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits,
Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done 't!

He turns on Bosola and bitterly upbraids him for consuming his own cruel orders. When the rogue asks for the reward of his services, Ferdinand furiously refuses it, and exits in a tempest of rage. Bosola now sees the shallow part he has played. The spark of humanity which has long been flickering in his breast is fanned at once into flame, and he tries with all the energy of his soul to bring the Duchess back to life:

What would I do, were this to do again?
I would not change my peace of conscience
For all the wealth of Europe. She stirs; here's life!
Return, fair soul, from darkness, and lead mine
Out of this sensible hell. She's warm! she breathes!
Upon thy pale lips I will melt my heart,
To store them with fresh color. Who's there?
Some cordial drink! Alas! I dare not call:
So pity would destroy pity. Her eye opes!
And Heaven in it seems to ope, that late was shut
To take me up to mercy.

The Duchess revives only long enough to breathe her husband's name, and falls back cold in death. With the body of the victim of his hired cruelty held tenderly in his arms, Bosola resolves to wash his soul clean from guilt in the blood of the wicked brothers who have used him as the tool of their villainy. This complete conversion of the hired rogue by sheer pity for the victim of his knavery, and his inauguration of counter-vengeance against his former masters in crime, are motives entirely new. As a psychological study, Bosola is one of the most finished of Webster's characters, and he stands as a remarkable climax of a long life of typical rogues. The stock character which had its first representatives in Kyd's Pedringano and Lazarotto finds its crowning incarnation in Bosola.

The contrast already noted between the two brothers of the Duchess is consistently maintained through the last act of the drama. It is but natural that a man of Ferdinand's fiery and passionate nature, when submitted to the awful strain noticed at the end of the fourth act, should rush into insanity; and we should expect the cold and calculating Cardinal to remain rational to the end. Ferdinand's madness is admirably executed; but just as admirably are shown the Cardinal's efforts to hide from Bosola his own complicity in the Duchess's death, and to bribe the rogue to murder Antonio. But in the wily Bosola the Cardinal has met his match. When Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, evinces an amorous passion for Bosola, he uses her to coax from the Cardinal the secret of his crime; and although the Cardinal, realizing at the last moment the dangerous position in which he has placed himself, seeks by poisoning Julia to save himself from the consequences of his self-revelation, the secret is treasured by Bosola, who is now confirmed in his purpose of vengeance. When Bosola asks the Cardinal to reward him for his past crimes, he is again put off; but the Cardinal promises to pay him well if he will kill Antonio. At the same time he gives Bosola the key to his lodging, that Bosola may come after midnight to remove Julia's body.

The next scene is thoroughly Elizabethan in its elaborate conceit. Antonio and his friend Delio visit an old fortification whose walls reflect a remarkably distinct echo; and the last words of each of Antonio's speeches, which are so chosen as to be in each case of a melancholy nature, are returned by the echo with ominous exactitude.

The Cardinal intends to kill Bosola as soon as the latter has disposed of Julia's body. To facilitate this purpose, and to prevent the revelation, through Ferdinand's mad ravings, of the complicity of the brothers in the Duchess's death, the Cardinal enjoins the nobles of the court not to leave their lodgings, no matter what grewsome sounds may be heard to proceed from his chamber.

In the dark, Bosola kills Antonio by mistake, and is all the more spurred on to his revenge by the revelation of his fatal error. He rushes to the Cardinal's lodgings and tells him that he has come to kill him. The Cardinal cries out; but, although his shrieks are heard by many of the nobles, they hesitate, because of his express injunction, to break into the room, thinking that he is only feigning in order to try their obedience to his orders. Bosola stabs the Cardinal, who has pleaded abjectly for his life, just as Ferdinand enters raving. Blinded by his madness, Ferdinand "wounds the Cardinal, and, in the scuffle, gives Bosola his death wound." Bosola is speedily revenged by stabbing the mad Duke. Although he feels his own death drawing near, Bosola revels in the fate of the Cardinal.

I do glory [he says]
That thou, which stoodst like a huge pyramid,
Begun upon a large and ample base,
Shall end in a little point, a kind of nothing.

The nobles at last burst in the door just in time to see the Cardinal and Bosola breathe their last; and the tragedy closes when they choose Antonio's son to succeed his mother in the dukedom of Malfi.

The "*Duchess of Malfi*" represents the supreme climax of the tragedy-of-blood, even if we acknowledge the greater merit, *as a work of art*, of Shakespeare's "*Hamlet*."

The excellence of the Shakespearean tragedy lies not so much in its consistent development of the stock ingredients of the tragedy-of-blood, as in those more universal qualities which reappear in the great poet's other dramas, like "Othello" and "Lear." *Considered solely as a tragedy-of-blood*, the mechanism of the "Duchess of Malfi" is superior to that of "Hamlet." While Shakespeare clung to the clumsy figure of the ghost crying out for revenge, Webster wisely discarded an expedient so essentially mechanical. While Shakespeare relinquished the stock villain, who had always been one of the most interesting characters in the tragedy-of-blood, Webster applied his genius to creating creatures of flesh and blood to replace the one-sided figures of his predecessors, and gave us such admirable studies as the contrasted Machiavelians, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, and the heroic rogue, Bosola. The action of Webster's play is simpler and more concentrated than that of the Shakespearean tragedy, and the climactic development of the revenge and the counter-vengeance is magnificently handled.

In regard to the power of characterization which Webster demonstrates in this tragedy, I have already spoken at length about the successful portrayal of the three most prominent male characters. It remains to reply to the attacks of those critics who have looked upon the Duchess herself as a mere lay figure. It must be remembered that we are dealing with what is essentially a tragedy of pity. The Duchess, while innocent of any criminal guilt, transgresses an established convention of noble society, and is forced to suffer for this trespass. We are interested primarily in her misfortune. Her sufferings excite our sympathetic pity, as the cruelty of her brothers rouses our emotion of terror. Placed in such a position, we could desire no more noble virtues in a heroine than patient forbearance and resolute fortitude. No woman on earth could stop the wheels of fate which have been set in motion to grind the Duchess to destruction, and there are very few who could have endured that fate with such serene resignation.

In conclusion, a few words of general criticism of John

Webster may not be amiss. I have already indicated Webster's position among our English tragic dramatists as second only to that of Shakespeare. No other of our great English playwrights, excepting only the great poet himself, comes nearer than Webster to realizing Aristotle's ideal of tragedy; no other is such a coequal master of terror and of pity; no other produces such an overpowering impression of the inevitability of the tragic fate which dominates the shattering crash of character on character. Thrilling the soul one instant with a revelation of the chasmy abysses of crime, the horrors of hopeless despair, the grewsome agonies of madness, and an accumulation of

All pains the immortal spirit must endure,

Webster turns the next instant to strum that chord of piteous pathos which calls up a flood of tears to purge gently the mind of the images of his terror. Webster is far from being a versatile dramatist; but he is so transcendently great in the essential qualities of tragic poetry that beside him Jonson appears labored and Beaumont and Fletcher seem trivial, and we can have little hesitancy in joining Mr. Swinburne in ranking him above Euripides in the category of world tragedists.

With a thorough appreciation of his own merits as a tragic author, Webster labored long and earnestly to produce his perfected masterpieces. In approaching his public he never disguised his sincerity in a cloak of simulated modesty. Instead of assuming abject tones in his prefaces, he always revealed a just appreciation of the excellence of his work. Convinced of the dignity of his position as a tragedist, Webster wished to be taken seriously. He always wrote for "the judicious reader," and tuned his reflections accordingly. He is, after Jonson, the most literary of our Elizabethan dramatists. He frequently quotes from Virgil and Ovid, from Horace and Martial; and throughout his work evinces a sound and valuable scholarship. The careful elaboration which characterizes his plays is, unfortunately, the source of his chief dramaturgical error. In his eagerness to develop all of the details of his production he often fails to rivet the

attention on one prime feature of his plot, and therefore loses in general effect. In the "Devil's Law Case," for example, we are bewildered by a superfluity of carefully drawn characters, not knowing upon whom to fix the chief attention. But if Webster's plays are not infrequently lacking in dramatic coherence, as a whole they display an extraordinary command of individual situations. Next to Shakespeare, Webster is our greatest master of the *scene*, for its own sake; and by the inherent power of his situations is capable with ease of thrilling us with terror or melting us with pity. In his characterization Webster, as we have seen, is careful and effective, although not very versatile. He contented himself, for the most part, with elaborating the stock figures which had been legacied to him by his predecessors in the tragedy-of-blood, and with breathing the breath of life into their nostrils. Although he somewhat obstinately eschews soliloquy, Webster commands a dramatic dialogue which is always effective, and which frequently reveals an extraordinary insight into the intricacies of human nature.

In all of his plays Webster evinces a peculiar fondness for aphorisms, many of which are concise, striking, and quotable. The following, culled at random, may indicate this propensity of our poet:

Cowardly dogs bark loudest.
 There's nothing sooner dry than woman's tears.
 'Tis better to be fortunate than wise.
 She hath no faults who hath the art to hide them.
 Man, like to cassia, is proved best, being bruised.

Another of Webster's peculiarities is his habitual practice of repeating pet phrases verbatim. The fine simile,

Glories, like glowworms, afar off shine bright;
 But, looked to near, have neither heat nor light,

appears, for instance, both in "Vittoria Corombona" and in the "Duchess of Malfi."

In regard to the technical features of Webster's versification, his cadences recall those of Shakespeare at his maturity. Webster employs a far greater proportion of feminine to masculine line terminations than we meet with in the early

Elizabethans, but his verse is not so feminine as Fletcher's. He seems to have cared little for the glamour of delicate rhythm, and in some of his sublimest passages actually endeavors to disguise the metrical flow of his verse. In his most tragic moments he often emulates the measured prose of Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene, rather than tunes his lines to a melody which haunts the ear. This technical reserve is often very effective, and cannot but enforce our admiration; but it sometimes leads the poet to a studied carelessness of rhythm which Mr. Swinburne justly deplores. This, together with the elaborate and studious composition which characterizes many of Webster's passages, led Henry Fitzgeoffrey to jeer at him as "crabbed Websterio, the playwright, cart-wright," and to state saucily that the poet wrote "with his mouth awry;" but seldom has a small man's censure of a great genius returned more ridiculously upon the offender.

In regard to the æsthetic characteristics of Webster's style, we are struck immediately by his fondness for figures drawn from the world of imaginative gloom. The screech owl rasping the silence of midnight with its hoarse and incongruous cry, the mole which blindly burrows its way through ineradicable darkness, the grim trophies of the charnel house, the yew tree that wreathes its roots about the rotting skeletons of the dead—these are the figures which hover continuously in his fancy. The glowworms which flicker through the mists of his imagination are brooding over the graves of the damned. The lark never sings in his tragedies; but sometimes we catch the dying fall of a dirge chanted by a heart-broken mother, or the doleful howl which echoes from a madhouse. An atmosphere of appalling terror hovers over the Italy of his dreams, and shrouds his characters as they wander "through the maze of mystery."

But in the poetic horror of Webster there is none of the hopeless despair which characterizes the work of Tourneur, none of that brooding sympathy with crime which cankers the sweetness of Ford. If Webster steeps us in an atmosphere of terror, he does not sink us into the despair of

pessimism: his sympathy leads us out of the abyss, and his lyric eloquence lightens the gloom of his darkest depths. Neither is he fascinated by the mystic allurements of crime. As Mr. Swinburne has said: "No poet is morally nobler than Webster." His ideas of right and wrong are unperverted by his careful depiction of villainy, and his sense of poetic justice is stolid and irrefragable. Furthermore, Webster is, if I may again quote Mr. Swinburne, "the cleanliest writer of his time." He found the tragedy-of-blood sullied with rape and incest; he left it purged with poetic refinement.

It is as an artist in the tragedy-of-blood that Webster reveals the full majesty of his genius. He breathed a new breath of life into the traditional characters of the species; he refined it with the infusion of imaginative lyricism; he transformed its brutal butcheries into a depiction of psychological horror. When Webster died, the species died with him. To be sure, it exerted no small influence on the heroic tragedy of the Restoration era; but as a form of dramatic composition it had sunk into hopeless decay. Elkanah Settle's "Empress of Morocco," to select a typical example of later adaptation of the species, is almost sickening in its ferocity.

If Webster carried the tragedy-of-blood to its ultimate perfection, it is no less true that the tragedy-of-blood rendered the same service to Webster. The species which had been handed down from Kyd to Tourneur was admirably adapted to call forth all of the rare powers of our poet's genius. He was the right man in the right place; and this, it seems to me, is the final explanation of his greatness.

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